HERO PRIESTS OF THE WAR

By the REV. DR. PETER GUILDAY

FATHER JOSEPH DERGENT, THE MARTYR OF GELRODE

I HAD rather not tell this story—the story of a martyrdom in our own times. Not because the incidents in themselves, frightful as they are, are a blot on the honor of the regiment which perpetrated them, but because an incident happened while I was writing it which was as startling as it was poignant and freighted with grief. One of my college chums of Louvain has been sending me from the first time it appeared in London a little Flemish paper published there called the *Voice of Belgium*; and some time in February last I read the shocking tale of Father Joseph Dergent's death for his faith.

You will look in vain for Gelrode, where he was pastor, on the ordinary maps of Belgium, for the town is too small to be put there. Many a time when I was at college in Louvain we passed Gelrode on our way to Aerschot, and the quiet peaceful village was as picturesque as any in Flanders. When I began to collect material for this series of articles I felt that Father Dergent's martyrdom ought to find a place in the collection; but in reading over again the original report of his death, published February 12, 1915, there was a passage in the Flemish account I could not translate.

I knew one Flemish student from Louvain at the Catholic University of America, and I told him that I had a difficult passage I wanted him to look over for me. He came to my room accompanied by another Flemish student, who had just arrived from Belgium, and who lived through the bombardment of Louvain. He was recently allowed to come to America by the authorities in order to finish his studies for the priesthood.

After talking about the old times together at the University of Louvain I hunted through my papers, found the number of the *Voice* in question and showed him the passage. For a moment he grew as white as a ghost, and the tears gathered in his eyes, but with a strong effort he got control of himself and then said:

"I was the involuntary cause of his death!"

I saw he was almost overcome by the memory of it, but after he had calmed down he told me this story:

In his pastoral of Christmas, 1914, Cardinal Mercier says: "In my diocese alone I know that thirteen priests were put to death. One of these, the parish priest of Gelrode, suffered, I believe, a veritable martyrdom. I made a pilgrimage to his grave, and, amid the little flock which so lately he had been feeding with the zeal of an apostle, there did I pray to him that from the height of Heaven he would guard his parish, his diocese, his country."

These words from one who has never been known to overpraise or to underestimate a single fact in his long experience as professor of philosophy at the University of Louvain are strong words indeed. How true they are the reader can easily judge for himself.

Father Joseph Dergent was a splendid type of the Belgian country priest—simple, active and obliging, generous to a fault, and his mastery over souls was as swift as it was marvellous. He had won a reputation for sanctity and for devotion to the poor as curate in the little towns of Bethy and Lichtaart, and when he was installed as parish priest of Gelrode in November, 1913, the people of these two little villages came in a body to honor his installation.

Father Joseph Dergent.

"I thank God for having brought me to you here," he said to the people of Gelrode, "and all my energies will henceforth be spent among you to further your spiritual welfare. For you and your children I will work and pray, suffer and die."

The Divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will, heard this promise and took the saintly man at his word before a year had passed. For nine months he was to labor among them and was then to give his life for the faith he had taught them to cherish and to love.

His first work was to teach little children to sing. And so well did he succeed that a month after his installation, on Christmas Day, the little ones of the parish sang so beautifully in their pure, lovely voices that everything was deserted, fields and workshops and estaminets, to listen to them.

Dergent was an ardent social worker of the most intelligent type. He instituted congregations in the parish (which scarcely numbered more than a thousand souls) for the purpose of binding the men into religious unions. In a short time every man in the parish was enrolled in one or the other of these societies, the chief of which were a circle for the relief of the poor of the district and the reading circle which guarded the literature coming into the village and thus protected the morals of the growing boys and girls.

In order to improve the agricultural methods in use he formed a farmers' union and a gardeners' union, and everything in his parish pointed to a moral and intellectual betterment when the news reached him on August 19 that the neighboring town of Aerschot had fallen into the hands of the enemy. Its Mayor had been assassinated and the town had been burned to the ground!

The following day the enemy entered Gelrode on their way to Louvain and after a slight resistance the town was taken. The commanding officer of the invading regiment ordered all the people to go to the church, and when all were in the doors were locked and an officer mounted the pulpit and announced to the frightened people that sniping had occurred and that punishment would be meted out immediately.

No evidence was given, no denials heard. Seven young men and one young woman were then taken out and lined up against the church wall and shot. After this the people were allowed to return to their houses and the evening passed in a deathly silence.

Father Dergent was openly accused by the enemy of being the cause of the sniping. He protested in vain. He was ordered to remain within the presbytery and the enemy's soldiers, who belonged to the same regiment that burned Louvain, chalked insulting words and phrases on the door of his house. Some of his parishioners, braver than the others, came to him to cheer him up, and they wiped out the insulting inscriptions and substituted words of praise in their place.

In the American College at Louvain during July and August some few American and Flemish students had remained. At the outbreak of the war they were enrolled in the Belgian Red Cross service and two of them—one of whom is the young student who sat here in my room last night and told me this story, which I find corroborated word for word in the *Voice of Belgium* for February 12, 1915—were charged with visiting the surrounding towns to assist the wounded.

These two students came to Gelrode on August 25 and after encouraging Father Dergent they started out through the village to look for the wounded, for there had been firing when the town was taken. They found four civilians in a very bad state, whose wounds needed the attention of a physician if their lives were to be spared. What to do with the wounded was a problem and my young friend advised Father Dergent to take the wounded either to St. Peter's Hospital in Louvain or to Aerschot, where a temporary hospital had been established in the monastery of the Picpus Fathers.

My friend the student had received nothing but kindness from the enemy and he felt sure that he was right in advising the parish priest to make a Red Cross bandage for his arm, for with this on he felt that he would be allowed to pass freely through the enemy's lines. The parish priest's servant made this Red Cross armlet, and early next morning, August 26, Father Dergent put the wounded men on straw beds in a wagon and with one of his parishioners started out for Aerschot.

About 8 o'clock that morning they arrived at the monastery, which had been turned into a hospital. The fathers saw at once that Father Dergent was in danger, for the Red Cross badge was poorly made and was not stamped with the enemy's seal. They advised him strongly not to leave the hospital until they had arranged the matter with the enemy's physicians, but he told them of what the young Flemish student had said and that he had no time to wait for all this red tape, because his parish was in the hands of the enemy and his people needed his support every moment in the trials they were going through.

After going to confession to his regular confessor, Father Blasius, to whom he said: 'I feel, father, that this is my last confession," he started back to Gelrode. He had scarcely reached the limits of the town of Aerschot when he was arrested. His Red Cross badge was examined and he was technically accused of spying on the enemy's outposts under a disguise. That night he spent in the cellar of the city hall of Aerschot a prisoner and it was announced to him that on the morrow he was to die.

Father Dergent was about 57 years old, a strong specimen of the sturdy Flemish stock which has never known fear, and he showed no concern over his fate. It was easy to die when it was in the pursuit of his duty as a priest of God. Had he known the martyrdom awaiting him he might not have passed that night so calmly or so peacefully.

The people of Aerschot were all huddled together in the Church of Notre Dame. The priests of the town were imprisoned there also, in the sanctuary, and no one was allowed to move except at regular intervals, when a group was led outside the church for a few moments to satisfy their needs.

That morning an officer mounted the pulpit and told the terrified priest and people that the parish priest of Gelrode was to die for his temerity in leaving his own town, even though it was on an errand of mercy. In the several accounts I have of what followed the writers all apologize for telling the facts exactly as they happened.

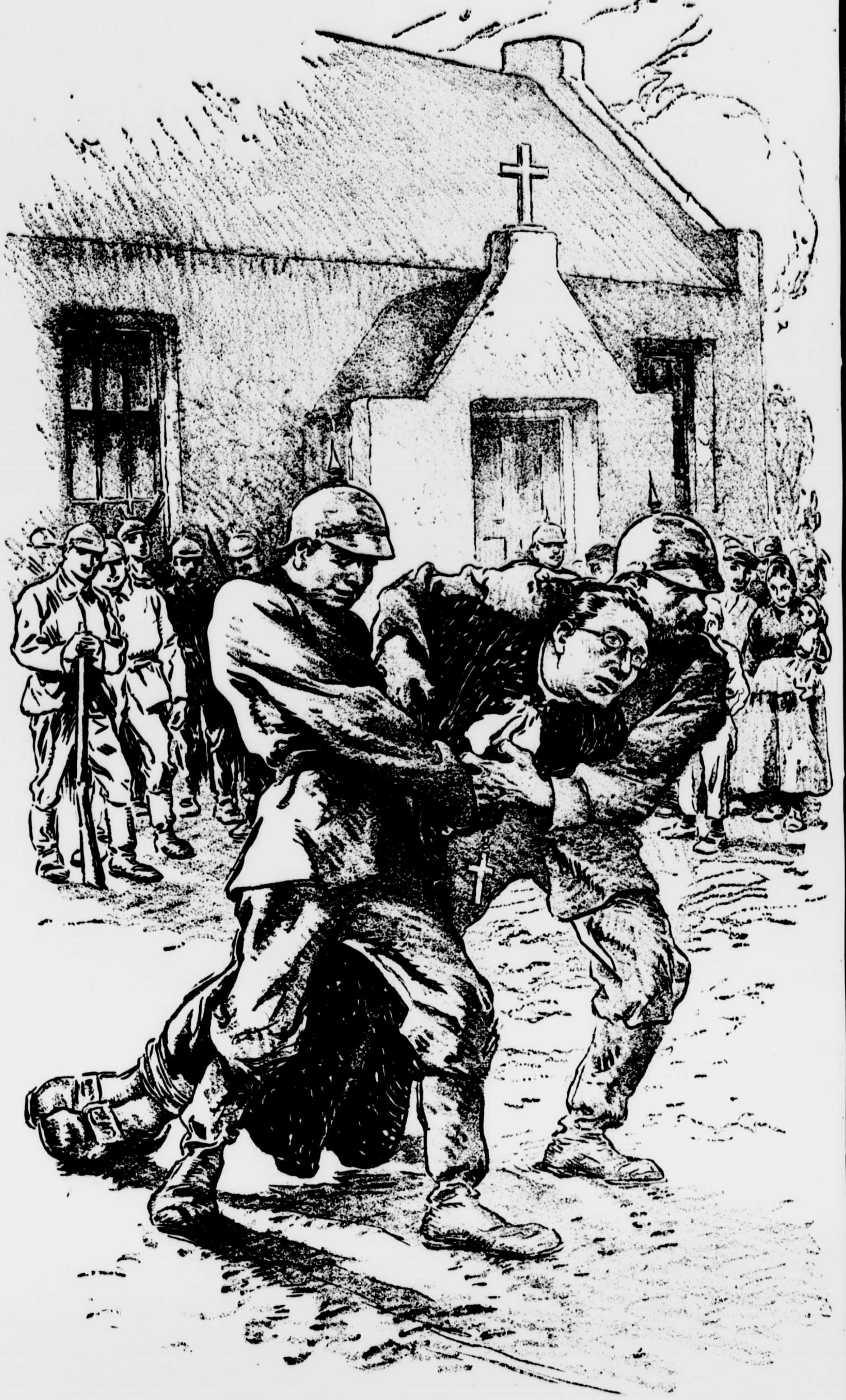
Father Dergent was placed upright in a certain thing which stands outside many churches in Belgium against the wall. His feet and arms were bound with wire and as each group was brought out of the church they were forced at the point of a revolver to defile him—I cannot be more exact, for decency's sake. His face was cut and bleeding from the blows he had received, and for three hours this hideous comedy was carried out in the presence of the enemy's soldiers.

When the soldiers grew tired of it one among them proposed to give him his freedom if he would cry out, "To h—— with Jesus Christ!" There was only one answer to that temptation to apostasize, and it was a firm "Never!"—the only word that passed his lips during the whole time of the outrage. Two soldiers then dragged Father Dergent to a spot about thirty meters away from the church and shot him through the heart.

His body was stripped and thrown into the Demer. Two days later it was picked up and buried. After the capture of Malines, when things had quieted down, Cardinal Mercier went to the spot where he was interred, the body was exhumed and carried in procession to the church at Gelrode, where the martyred priest was buried with the highest ecclesiastical honors.

That such a thing could take place in modern times is almost incredible. Unfortunately it is true and Father Dergent's name stands out among the heroes of Belgium to-day as one who suffered for his faith as well as for his country. Cardinal Mercier would never have called him a martyr unless he was sure of the facts, and the young Flemish student who sat and told me this story heard the incidents spoken about by the people of Gelrode on the morning of the burial there.

The cause of Father Dergent's awful suffering and death he certainly was not, but it is not difficult to imagine what must have passed over his memory when he saw the heading of the article I showed him: "Joseph Dergent, the Martyr Priest of Gelrode."



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FIRE CHIEF CROKER'S FIGHT WITH A RIVER OF FLAMING GASOLENE

Chief Croker's career in the New York Fire Department was filled with exciting adventures. For pure thrills perhaps none of them was more extraordinary than the experience which he describes in the following article.

Great Fire Fighter Tells of the Wild Night When Huge Tank Exploded and Drenched Streets With Blazing Liquid

By EDWARD F. CROKER.

THE night of November 28, 1901—there are few firemen who were in the department at the time that will forget it. Not that there was a heavy death toll on that night; as a matter of fact there was not a life lost; but it was a night when queer things happened with a rapidity that made one dizzy.

There had been a little bonfire down in the Cherry Hill district, a business which looked bad for Brooklyn Bridge for a moment, but it was nothing more than a flash in the pan. John Rush took me down to that blaze on two wheels of an automobile, so to speak, but that was John's way of doing things. Never was there such a driver in any fire department, and very likely there will never be such a one again. John, poor fellow, saw to that when he drove himself headfirst into a brick wall.

There was something in the air that made one shiver that night. John spoke of it as we chugged back to headquarters.

"Queer night, to-night, sir," he said.

"It is a queer night," I assented.

"Did you ever," he asked, "see the street lights so dim?"

"I don't believe I ever have, John."

There was a little silence as we picked our way up the Bowery. Then John said, speaking more to himself than to me:

"Sort of spooky, you know. Odd how very dark it is and yet there's no fog."

We arrived at headquarters at about 11 o'clock. The city was quiet—quiet so far as fires were concerned at least. I picked up a magazine, but nothing in it seemed to hit the spot.

John looked in on his way to bed and said:

"Better take a nap, Chief, while you can. Good night, sir."

I threw myself down on a cot and tossed and turned. No doubt about it, there was something queer about the night. Maybe the air was overcharged with electricity. Whatever it was, the queerness had taken hold of my nerves and sleep was impossible. I rose, turned on the light and tried the magazine again.

The clock struck 2. There was a rap on the door.

"Come in," I called.

It was John Rush, his hair all mussed up.

"It's no use, Chief, I can't coax a wink. Saw your light burning and took the liberty of——"

"Sit down, John. I can't coax a wink either."

We talked a little about things of interest in the department. Fifteen minutes passed. An alarm began to come in. Instinctively we both counted.

"One, two, three—one, two, three, four—one, two." John looked at the chart.

"Tenth street and the East River, sir," he said.

We both exclaimed in the same breath:

"The gas works!"

I slipped on my coat and hat and John dashed out for his. There was no doubt that the prospect of activity was a relief to each of us. A couple of minutes later, perhaps less, the engine of my car was thundering its acclamation of pleasure, or protest; the double doors were sliding back, and we were on our way to the fire.

Up Lafayette street to Astor place, to Tenth street. East in Tenth street. As we turned the corner the first flare of fire came into view. The engine bells were sounding on all sides of us. The thrill of a fight got into our veins. In a moment we pulled up 100 feet from the blaze.

It was not the gas works which were burning. It was a six story building some 300 feet from the river.

"A veneering factory," said a battalion chief coming up.

That meant oils and paint, a stubborn fire to fight and always a menacing one, but not necessarily dangerous. Flames were shooting out of the second and third floor windows. Three leads of hose were already in the building. The men were acting with their usual devil may care bravery.

I walked down the street to the river. Immediately adjoining the burning building was a stable. Men were leading the horses out already and taking them to places of safety. Next to the stable was a large lumber yard. Between the lumber yard and the river were the gas works, the steel of the enormous tanks already glimmering in the light of the nearby flames.

As I came to the river's edge the shrill whistle of the first fireboat sounded. In a few minutes it came alongside, made fast and a crew of men started up the street carrying a line of hose. Ten minutes later two more fireboats were alongside and their engines were pumping the muddy river water into the veneering factory. I returned to the scene of the blaze. The gutters were running with a torrent of water four feet wide.

"See that one story building just to the west?" said the battalion chief hurrying up.

"Yes," I replied.

"It houses an enormous tank which is filled with gasolene."

Here was a peculiar situation, one to make any fireman nervous. A good, sharp fire blazing in an oil soaked building which had on one side a tank filled with gasolene and on the other a metropolitan gas plant. But there was nothing for us to do but fight the fire and hope for the best.

That is what we did. By 3 o'clock the fire was well under control and we all breathed a sigh of relief. The building had been pretty thoroughly gutted, but the walls looked solid. The blaze had been literally drowned. By this time the street to the river was like a river itself and a mighty torrential one at that.

I ordered half of the engines taken up and sent back to their houses. There was no longer any sign of fire, but enormous clouds of smoke told us what was smouldering.

"John," said I to my driver, "there seems to be no more reason for our remaining, so let's go."

"Right, sir," said he and stepped to crank up the engine.

I took my place in the car, glancing at John's stooped figure as I did so. His face was toward the fire, my back was to it. Suddenly he straightened up, crying, "Look!"

The side wall of the building was slowly toppling over. Its top gradually curved down, as a piece of paper burning at one edge will curve over, and suddenly collapsed and fell with a tremendous roar. A myriad of sparks shot into the darkness above. Then a huge cloud of black smoke rose like a wraith from the ruins. Spellbound we watched.

"One, two, three, four," I counted the seconds, "five, six, seven, eigh——"

A glimmer of light shot up from the one story building. A long tongue of flame leaped into the air and disappeared out of sight. Another tongue of flame did the same; then another, and another, and another, with increasing rapidity. In a moment a pillar of fire reached apparently to the very stars and a roar like that of distant thunder made our voices almost inaudible.

The gasolene tank was an inferno of flame.

I jumped to the street and ran past the burning buildings to the east. There was no more darkness to that night—it had been turned to day. Already I could see gasolene on the water in the street being carried rapidly to the river.

Our first thought was for the men in the veneering factory. One by one they came back to the windows and lodged on the sills, still playing their hose into the boiling cauldron.

"Come down, every man!" I shouted. The order was passed along the line, but the men moved down reluctantly. They could not see the danger. It is always hard to make a good fireman stop fighting a fire even when he knows that his life is in peril. I have seen men walk into almost certain death, impelled by an instinct common to all firemen, to get at the fire itself no matter what the risk.

Suddenly, without the least warning, a sheet of flame shot across the street. The cry went up:

"Run for your lives!"

And then, like some kind of ominous life, a wall of fire that stretched from curb to curb crept slowly but certainly down that flooded street toward the river.

It was the gasolene burning on the surface of the water. As greater quantities of it rushed forth from the shattered tank the blaze came on more rapidly. The men at the windows who had not heeded the first order to descend saw the danger now and clambered down for their lives. The last of them fairly waded through liquid flame to safety, some of them badly burned.

A score of us had retreated to the east of the factory toward the river. Before we realized our situation we were cut off from escape to the west, where the only real safety was to be found. High walls on each side of the street prevented escape in any way but straight to the fire boats.

Then occurred one of the most peculiar things in the history of the New York Fire Department, in the history probably of any fire department in the world.

The wall of flame seemed suddenly to find wings. It shot down the street, fanned by a stiff breeze, like a trim schooner driving before the wind. In an instant the flames were fairly scorching our faces. We turned and ran for our lives in earnest.

Most of us jumped on board the fire boats, but some, a little to the rear, plunged headlong into the river. There was not even time to loosen the ropes. They were hacked in two with axes, as were the lines of hose which held us to the shore.

Five minutes after that first sheet of flame had shot across the street there was a solid mass of fire from the veneering factory to the river, a distance of 300 feet. Thousands of feet of hose had been burned. Twoscore firemen had escaped with their lives by a miracle.

From the deck of my tug I looked back. First the stable burst into flame. Then the lumber yard was turned into a seething furnace. Then the gas works caught. A moment later the blaze had swept to the other side of the street and various small buildings added their fuel to the general inferno.

For the moment we were perfectly helpless. The fire was burning as if some demon had thrown up a torch from hell. The stable, filled with hay, was roaring like a big pile of safety matches. The gas works alone were generating enough heat to turn the engines of every ocean liner afloat. The entire blaze made one think that a section of the sun had been planted suddenly on the edge of Manhattan and intended to remain.

The fire was bad enough in itself, but the danger of what it might do, to what point it might spread before we could get back, was far worse.

Such was the situation when the three fireboats came abreast and with their bow streams throwing a veritable Niagara before them [illegible] surely fought their way [illegible] landing. Meanwhile, from the [illegible] side additional engines and new [illegible] were brought up and in a comparatively short time that solid block of flame was surrounded by [illegible] of solid water.

It was a tough job, as tough as [illegible] from the standpoint of fire fighting as I remember. But everything [illegible] an end, and at last that fire had [illegible] end. Some time after dawn we had [illegible] under control. By noon there was [illegible] longer any danger. When [illegible] came after some seventeen hours of steady fighting the blaze was out. [illegible] block of smouldering ruins stood at the edge of the East River.

To-day, outside of the department that fire is forgotten. But nothing short of death can ever [illegible] the picture of that street of fire [illegible] the minds of the men who [illegible] all but lost their lives [illegible]

HIS TEST OF A POLICEMAN

GEN. THEODORE A. BINGHAM who has been mentioned recently as a possible Public Service Commissioner or Superintendent of Prisons, would bring to either office a reputation for picturesqueness both of character and of language. Here is one of the many stories told of him when he was Police Commissioner of New York:

One day Gen. Bingham called to his office a young detective of Irish descent who had been making a reputation for himself but had not yet met the Commissioner. Gen. Bingham glared at him for a moment, then stumping over to him—the General has an artificial leg—looked him straight in the eye and snarled:

"You blankety blank!"

The young detective reddened with surprise and anger, hesitated for a moment, and then protested [illegible]

"Commissioner, that's [illegible] to a man."

"You blankety blank!" repeated [illegible] Bingham, more vehemently [illegible] fore.

The Irish in the de[illegible] let him stand no more.

"Commissioner," he [illegible] ing a step forward, "[illegible] and you're an old man [illegible] me that again I'll knock [illegible] off!"

Then, to his utter amazement, instead of summarily [illegible] Gen. Bingham burst [illegible] laughter.

"Fine, my boy, fine," [illegible] lightly. "That's [illegible] I wanted to find [illegible] man. Now sit down. I [illegible] job for you."